Talking With Tweens About Violence

Raising a child is one of the most gratifying jobs you'll ever have and one of the toughest. Try as you might to be the best parent you can, our complex world challenges you every day with disturbing issues that are difficult for children to understand and for parents to explain. But explain we must, or we miss a critical opportunity. Research shows that children, especially those between the ages of 8 and 12, want their parents to talk with them about today's toughest issues, including violence. Even when they reach adolescence, they want to have a caring adult in their lives to talk about these issues. In fact, those who have early conversations are more likely to continue turning to their parents as they become teens.

Violence in today's world in the media, in our neighborhoods and even in our schools can make our children feel frightened, unsafe and insecure. Kids are hearing about and often must cope with tough issues such as violence at increasingly earlier ages, often before they are ready to understand all the aspects of complicated situations. Yet, there is hope. Parents and other caring adults have a unique opportunity to talk with their children about these issues first, before everyone else does.

Even in such complex times, parents have the ability to raise healthy, confident, secure children who know how to resolve conflicts peacefully and make smart decisions to protect themselves. Parents should talk with their children to help them learn correct information and to impart the values they want to instill. Parents should also be a consistent, reliable, knowledgeable source of information. Here are some tips on getting started.

Develop open communication

It is important that you talk with your kids openly and honestly. Use encouragement, support and positive reinforcement so your kids know that they can ask any question–on any topic–freely and without fear of consequence. Provide straightforward answers; otherwise, your child may make up her own explanations that can he more frightening than any honest response you could offer. If you don't know the answer, admit it–then find the correct information and explore it together. Use everyday opportunities to talk as occasions for discussion. Some of the best talks you'll have with your child will take place when you least expect them. And remember that it often takes more than a single talk for children to grasp all they need to know. So talk, talk and talk again.

Encourage them to talk it out.

Children feel better when they talk about their feelings. It lifts the burden of having to face their fears alone and offers an emotional release. If you sense that a violent event (whether real or fictional) has upset your youngster, you might say something like, "That TV program we saw seemed pretty scary to me. What did you think about it?" and see where the conversation leads. If your child appears constantly depressed, angry or feels persecuted, it is especially important to reassure him that you love him and encourage him to talk about his concerns. And if he has been violent or a victim of violence, it is critical to give him a safe place to express his feelings.

Monitor the Media

Over the years, many experts have concluded that viewing a lot of violence in the media can be risky for children. Studies have shown that watching too much violence–whether on TV, in the movies, or in video games–can increase the chance that children will be desensitized to violence, or even act more aggressively themselves. Pay special attention to the kinds of media your children play with or watch. Parental advisories for music, movies, TV, video and computer games can help you choose age–appropriate media for your children. Try watching TV or playing video games with your children and talk with them about the things you see together. Encourage your children to think about what they are watching, listening to or playing–how would they handle situations differently? Let them know why violent movies

or games disturb you. For example, you might tell your nine-year-old, "Violence just isn't funny to me. In real life people who get shot have families and children, and it's sad when something bad happens to them." Watching the news and other media with your child enables you to discuss current events like war and other conflicts, and can provide an opportunity to reinforce the consequences of violence.

Parents and other caring adults can help tone down the effects of these violent messages. Here's how:

Actively supervise your child's exposure to all forms of media violence. Limit TV viewing to those programs you feel are appropriate. Be selective about which movies your child sees and which video and computer game he plays. Establish rules about the Internet by going on-line together to choose sites that are appropriate and fun for your child. Consider using monitoring tools for TV and the Internet, like the v-chip, a new technology that allows parents to block TV programs they consider inappropriate. Take advantage of the ratings system that provides parents with information about the content of a TV program or movie.

Acknowledge your children's fears and reassure them of their safety

Children who experience or witness violence, as well as those who have only seen violent acts on TV or in the movies, often become anxious and fearful. That's why it's important to reassure a child that their personal world can remain safe. Try saying something like this to your 7 or 8-year-old: "I know that you are afraid. I will do my very best to make sure you are safe." The recent school tragedies in Colorado and in Georgia have shown that violence can not only frighten children but can make them feel guilty for not preventing it. By providing consistent support and an accepting environment, you can help reduce children's anxieties and fears.

Take a stand

Parents need to be clear and consistent about the values they want to instill. Don't cave in to your children's assertion that "everybody else does it (or has seen it)" when it comes to allowing them to play what you view as an excessively violent game or to watch an inappropriate movie. You have a right and responsibility to say, "I don't like the message that game sends. I know that you play that game at your friend's house, but I don't want it played in our house."

Control your own behavior

When it comes to learning how to behave, children often follow their parents' lead, which is why it is important to examine how you approach conflict. Do you use violence to settle arguments? When you're angry, do you yell or use physical force? If you want your child to avoid violence, model the right behavior for her.

Set limits regarding children's actions towards others

Let your child know that teasing can become bullying and roughhousing can get out of control. If you see your child strike another, impose a "time out" in order for him to calm down, then ask him to explain why he hit the child. Tell him firmly that hitting is not allowed and help him figure out a peaceful way to settle the problem.

Hold family meetings

Regularly scheduled family meetings can provide children-and us- with an acceptable place to talk about complaints and share opinions. Just be sure that everyone gets a chance to speak. Use these meetings to demonstrate effective problem-solving and negotiation skills. Keep the meetings lively, but well controlled, so children learn that conflicts

can be settled creatively and without violence.

Convey strict rules about weapons

Teach your child that real guns and knives are very dangerous and that they can hurt and kill people. You might say, "I know in the cartoons you watch and the video and computer games you play, the characters are always shooting each other. They never get hurt; they just pop up again later like nothing ever happened. But in real life, someone who gets shot will be seriously hurt; sometimes they even die."

Talk about gangs and cliques

Gangs and cliques are often a result of young people looking for support and belonging. However, they can become dangerous when acceptance depends upon negative or antisocial behavior. If you believe your child might be exposed or attracted to a gang, talk about it together. Look for an opportunity–say you see an ad for a movie that makes gang life seem glamorous–and say, "You know, sometimes it seems like joining a gang might be cool. But it's not. Kids in gangs get hurt. Some even get killed because they try to solve their problems through violence. Really smart kids choose friends who are fun to be with and won't put them in any danger." Many communities have programs that help prevent gang violence.

Talk with other parents

help give your kids a consistent anti-violence message by speaking with the parents of your kids' friends about what your children can and cannot view or play in your homes. Ask other parents if there's a gun in their home. If there is, talk with them to make sure they've taken the necessary safety measures. Having this kind of conversation may seem uncomfortable, but keep in mind that nearly 40 percent of accidental handgun shootings of children under 16 occur in the homes of friends and relatives.

Pay particular attention to boys

Most boys love action. But action need not become violence. Parents must distinguish between the two and help their boys do so as well. Allow them safe and healthy outlets for their natural energy. And recognize that talking–especially about violence–is different for boys than for girls. Boys may feel ashamed to express their real feelings about violence. Instead of sitting down for a " talk," initiate the topic while the two of you are engaged in an activity he enjoys. Provide privacy for these conversations. And be ready to listen when he's ready to talk, even if the timing isn't ideal. (Pollack, Real Boys, 1998.)

Ask the schools to get involved

Find out about your school's violence prevention efforts. Encourage the teaching of conflict-resolution skills and "peer mediation" programs (where children counsel other children). Suggest training teachers in de-escalating and preventing violence.

Get additional support and information

We hope you have found this information helpful. If you still want more information, go to the library or bookstore and check out books for parents. There are lots of people you can talk with like doctors, nurses, teachers, members of the clergy or other parents.

Source: *Talking With Kids About Tough Issues*
http://www.talkingwithkids.org/